MUSIC

Punk's not dead—and it's not white either

The Black, Brown, and Indigenous Crew connects underground music with radical politics to make a community with room for everyone.

by **Kerry Cardoza**
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Black, Brown, and Indigenous Crew members Shanna Collins, Joanna Bo, and Ephran Ramírez Jr.
Credit: Photos by Leslie Frempong

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In 2012, Shanna Collins went to her first black-run DIY punk show in Chicago. It wasn't long after 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was shot dead in Florida while walking to the home of his father's girlfriend carrying a can of Arizona fruit juice cocktail and a bag of Skittles. "I was experiencing a lot of anger," she says. "A lot of disenchantment with a lot of systems."

At that show, Collins saw right away that punk might be a good outlet for that anger. She was 23 and growing increasingly interested in radical politics. "I was looking for answers that institutions weren't giving me," she says. A few years earlier, while enrolled at Knox College in downstate Galesburg, Illinois, Collins had traveled abroad to study in Botswana. "Being one of the few black folks at college was taking its toll on me," she says. "I needed to be as far away from the United States as possible."

Once back in the U.S., she continued to look for pathways to liberation that felt authentic to her, and in 2013 that search led her to her first Black and Brown Punk Show festival. This more or less annual event, also known as BnB Fest, was launched in 2010 by Monika Estrella Negra and Donté Oxun, founders of the Black and Brown Punk Show Collective. It explicitly showcased bands featuring people of color, with proceeds from the door donated to inclusive, revolutionary political causes and organizations. The collective and its festival supported communities of color through arts, activism, and fund-raising, and worked to challenge oppressive attitudes in the DIY scene, particularly against LGBTQ people.

Estrella Negra met Collins, who identifies as queer, through the basement punk scene, and invited her to that black-run show in 2012. Collins remembers her first BnB Fest as an eye-opening experience. "I was learning about radical politics. I was learning about environmentalism. I was learning about black rights, black power," she says. "I wanted to be part of that."

In 2017, Collins became a member of the Black and Brown Punk Show Collective herself. After that year's festival, the group decided to reorganize itself as the Black, Brown, and Indigenous Crew (BBIC), which they consider an extension of the Black and Brown project Estrella Negra and Oxun began. "We wanted to continue to do the work that previous organizers were doing," Collins says.

The festival is also a little different this year, though with the same mission in its heart. Previously it lasted an entire weekend, but for 2018 it's just one day: On Saturday, October 20, at DIY venue Caliwaukee North, BBIC hosts a mini fest featuring seven local bands and three workshops. (If you need the address, e-mail the organizers at bbicchicago@gmail.com.)

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The Resurrection: Black, Brown, and Indigenous Crew Punk Fest with Blacker Face, Molcajete, Frank Waln, K.E.N, the Breathing Light, Mermaid N.V., and Megiapa, with DJ sets by Las Bizcochos

The fest also includes the workshops "Decolonizing Punk Rock: Understanding Indigenous Identity," "Alternatives to Calling the Police During Mental Health Crises," and "Punks and Zines: Self Publishing for Our Movements." Sat 10/20, workshops at 4 PM, bands at 8 PM, Caliwaukee North, bbicchicago@gmail.com for details, $5-$10 donation requested, all-ages

BBIC hadn't planned on throwing a festival this year (the BnB Fest was usually in August), but a few months ago its members decided that the good it could do would be worth the effort—as the collective put it, "The presence of black, brown, and indigenous people is needed in punk." The name of this year's event, "The Resurrection," doubles as a reassurance that the festival, though it's happening late, isn't going anywhere—and as an announcement that the spirit of Black and Brown lives on in BBIC.

The festival includes plenty of hardcore, but not every act plays fast, aggressive punk. Frank Waln is a Sicangu Lakota rapper, born on the Rosebud reservation in South Dakota, who moved to Chicago to pursue a hip-hop career. The Breathing Light play Sun Ra-inspired, futurist punk. Blacker Face combine gospel-inflected vocals with blues and funk in their otherworldly tunes. The lineup is sonically diverse on purpose.

Ephran Ramírez Jr., the newest of BBIC's four current members, points out that the variety of sounds in the lineup—with several artists who don't play "your typical punk music"—is a deliberate choice. For the collective, punk is an outlook and an approach more than it is an aesthetic.

Ramírez, who identifies as queer, cisgender, and Puerto Rican, joined BBIC this past summer, after getting involved with an early iteration of BnB in 2013. He believes it's crucial to have a fest centered on punks of color. "People forget that punk has its roots in black music, and that black people and other people of color have been involved in punk since the beginning," he says. "A lot of people see punk as a white genre. It's pretty frustrating."

Ramírez helped organize a preshow for the BBIC festival last week at the Harold Washington Library, where he works as the lead STEM mentor for the YouMedia Center. The bill included teen performers from the YouMedia program. "I feel like youth often get forgotten about," he says. But every music scene needs fresh blood to stay healthy, as older folks age out and start staying home. Most of the kids in the YouMedia program are into hip-hop, Ramírez says, and the preshow let them see young people making other styles of music—and it gave everyone the chance to perform for a wider audience.

Some of the artists at the BBIC Punk Fest, clockwise from left: Megiapa, Blacker Face, and the Breathing Light
Credit: Photos by Michelle Pearson, Egon Schiele, and Kyle Ozero

Ramírez was a teenager himself when he got hooked on punk. As a student at East Leyden High in northwest suburban Franklin Park, he was mostly a loner, having moved there from Canaryville on the south side. But one day when he was about 16, some classmates he played with in the school band invited him to hang out after classes—and through them, he first heard punk music. "I started going to basement shows and living in houses that had shows," he says. "It was all about feeling accepted, finally feeling like there was a group of people I fit in with as an outcast. That's what drew me in."

Ramírez, now 32, started going to DIY shows in 2004, and he says the scene has gotten noticeably more diverse since then—though there's plenty of room left for improvement. Kyle Ozero, singer and guitarist for the Breathing Light, gives Black and Brown a lot of credit for that change. The Breathing Light has played the festival every year since 2012, and Ozero remembers that the BnB collective began in part because so few such events catered specifically to black DIY bands. The shortage was even more painfully acute after Afropunk cofounder James Spooner parted ways with that festival in 2008—since then it's become more and more corporatized.

The punk scene in Chicago has always been segregated, much like the city. White punks tend to live and play shows on the north side, while people of color tend to live and have shows on the south side. Ozero says that the original BnB organizers' goals included closing the gap between black and Latino punks on the south side.

"A lot of people have kind of felt validated and seen," Ozero says. "The Pilsen Latino punk scene—it had its own politics. Those were the politics of all the punks around. And that was great—because, as a black person, I got to see the Latino experience and their politics and issues that they're going through. A lot of conversations and viewpoints opened up. We were able to bridge cultural experiences and shared experiences."

Estrella Negra, who's moved to Philadelphia and no longer participates in the Chicago collective, says she initially focused on creating a welcoming environment for queer, trans, and intersex people of color (QTIPOC). "Chicago has a pretty expansive underground music scene, but it can be oftentimes homogenous, with a lot of cis white men gatekeeping," she says. "We had this idea of creating a safe space for us to actually exist and also network with other black and brown folks in subversive spaces from around the country."

What Estrella Negra and Oxun started in Chicago has since spread to other cities: Break Free Fest in Philadelphia, the Universe Is Lit in Oakland, and BnB-inspired events in New Orleans, Houston, and Atlanta. "They started a whole revolution from Chicago—black people and other brown people starting festivals and giving platforms to bands that never had it before," Ozero says. "It's way bigger than Chicago, and I kind of wish people knew that, because it's growing. It's growing like crazy."

Estrella Negra is especially glad to see other organizers stick with the model of self-sufficiency and self-determination. "I'm really happy that the idea is getting spread around, versus the corporatization of Afropunk and co-optation of radical subculture," she says. "I like it just to be a very fluid thing, because every festival is different depending on where you are in the country, and every culture is different. I just want to keep it kind of in the hands of the people that actually want to create those spaces for themselves."

Collins, Ramírez, and Bo
Credit: Leslie Frempong

Representation is a huge motivator for everyone who gets involved in the Black and Brown fests. "People talk about punk as this very white-dominated, this very cis-dominated, male-dominated space," Collins says. "My introduction to punk was not through that. It was through black folks, people of color, who were doing really radical things. I really want other black folks, other people of color, who are not familiar with punk to be introduced to it that way."

Blacker Face bassist PT Bell applauds the collective for what it does not just at the festival but also throughout the year—which includes putting together benefit shows, DJ nights, movie screenings, and art shows as well as posting educational content on its social media accounts. "The amount of practical political work that BBIC fest organizers do when the fest isn't happening—the resources they tap people into are valuable to the scene," Bell says. "There's also a bastion of historical knowledge that these folks have correlated and issue out to the masses. There's a diasporic concern that's really incredible. There's deep origins of some kinds of punk imagery: Mohawks, piercings, things of that sort."

BBIC also keeps in mind the group's original goal of uplifting communities. In 2017 its members hosted a series of fund-raising events for a local punk named JT who'd been picked up by Immigration and Customs Enforcement and held in a deportation center. (JT was eventually released.) And earlier this year, BBIC hosted an art show whose proceeds benefited not only the festival but also two community groups: Chicago Boricua Resistance, which advocates for Puerto Ricans on the island and in the diaspora, and Brown and Proud Press, a local POC collective that offers opportunities for healing through creative writing, public readings, workshops, and more.

The beneficiary of this year's festival, the Chi-Nations Youth Council, is a local youth-led Native American organization with a focus on environmental and social justice. "We have to acknowledge that we live on stolen land," Collins says. "And we have to acknowledge that indigenous cultures and indigenous people deserve our support here. So we wanted to bring that to the forefront at this festival."

The workshops offered at the festival also intend to educate and uplift. "Decolonizing Punk Rock: Understanding Indigenous Identity" is an opportunity for participants to learn what it means to be indigenous in punk. "Alternatives to Calling the Police During Mental Health Crises" is a hands-on workshop, facilitated by a local group of the same name, aimed at training people in de-escalation in order to protect mentally ill and psychiatrically disabled people from the danger of police intervention. And "Punks and Zines: Self Publishing for Our Movements," presented by Brown and Proud Press, teaches the basics of making a DIY zine.

This year's BBIC participants—organizers and musicians alike—hope that the festival can continue to open up the Chicago scene to more black and brown folks.

"To me, what's important is empowering people to do more, to get involved in punk, to not feel alienated from these scenes, to dispel all the myths about this being a white genre of music, and just to make our scene more diverse in general in the long run—because obviously the more diverse, the better," Ramírez says. "And I would really love if more bands that are primarily black and brown just started coming up out of the woodwork."

Collins hopes that she can share her experience of being embraced by the scene with other people of color. "Punk has just been a great way for me to express my anger at the system—my anger at racism, sexism, and all types of oppression," she says. "They made a space for me, and so that's what I continue to want to introduce to other people—other people who look like me, other people who are just as oppressed as me."

She also stresses that music can be an accessible pathway to radical politics. "What I hope that people get out of this is that punk is a valid form of resistance," she says. "Our understanding of punk and hardcore music is in no way ever apolitical. This music articulates the rage of our ancestors. This is as much for them as it is for the next generation of kids who have a chip on their shoulder toward policing, prisons, immigration raids, and trauma. We're here for them." ■

TAGGED: Black and Brown Punk Show Collective | Black, Brown, and Indigenous Crew | Black, Brown, and Indigenous Crew Punk Fest | Blacker Face | BnB Fest | Break Free Fest | Brown and Proud Press | Caliwaukee North | Chi-Nations Youth Council | Chicago Boricua Resistance | Donté Oxun | Ephran Ramírez Jr. | Frank Waln | hardcore | inclusive | K.E.N | Kyle Ozero | Las Bizcochos | LGBTQ | Megiapa | Mermaid N.V. | molcajete | Monika Estrella Negra | punk | QTIPOC | radical | Shanna Collins | the Breathing Light | The Resurrection | the Universe Is Lit | Vol. 48 No. 2 | YouMedia Center

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